

## Fight or Flight Mode by EvieSmallwood

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**Summary:**

Mike looks away; he just can't face her. He's suddenly so angry at himself that it hurts. What is he thinking? What is he doing?

He knows why it's happening. He knows it's not just hormones, which is what she's been writing it off as for the past few months. He knows it's because every time he sleeps he dreams about her—either all of the good moments or nightmares of the bad. He knows it's because every time he breathes he wonders if she's breathing too, and because he feels guilty that he can't find her yet. No matter how hard he tries he can't fucking find her, and what if she's scared, what if she's alone, what if she's dead—

All of that. And Mr. Kowalski really is an asshole.

## Fight or Flight Mode

### Author's Note:

Hello, all! This is yet another angsty Mike Wheeler story, which is kind of a new and improved version of my last one (but you don't have to read it first).

I just really wanted to touch on Mike's post-s1 angst. Please enjoy!

His back hits the asphalt with a sickening thud. The wind is knocked straight out of him; he gasps sharply, and then coughs as he sucks in a bit of blood.

Troy leans over him. *Troy*. A part of Mike can't believe they're at this again. It's been what, six months? Seven?

It's just sad at this point.

A foot comes down, kicking his ribs, *hard*. Mike hisses in pain, and then starts laughing. It's not even funny, but it's the first time in so long that he's felt anything at all. The pain burns, but burning is better than the numbness and cold of the past.

"What are you laughing for?!"

Troy's voice is a little muffled. Mike realises that his ears are ringing. He clutches his side, gasping.

"What a useless little *fuck*," Troy spits. He grabs James by the arm. "Let's go."

Mike hears their footsteps smacking against the ground. He looks skyward, a little dazed. Blinking takes too long. *How the hell am I supposed to explain this?*

He'd been picked on by Troy before plenty of times—even hit, or shoved against lockers; all of those classic bully moves. But Troy has never gone so far as to beat the shit out of him. In fact, he'd pretty much let Mike alone since...

*DO IT!*

Go.

*Yeah that's right! You better run! She'll kill you! She's our friend and she's crazy!*

He winces. They must have been pissed. Probably they'd been planning their revenge for a while.

Mike has to hand it to him—it was pretty patient of Troy to wait this long. Mike's only known him to be impulsive and idiotic. And he's upped his game, too. Summer school must *really* be shaping him up into a fine young man.

Mike gathers in some air and then slowly sits up, pulling on his own pant leg for leverage. His left arm feels a little shitty, but it's not broken, that he can tell. Maybe just bruised in the wrong spot.

His hand comes away from his mouth covered in blood. Mike manages to smear some away, wiping it on his already blood-speckled shirt. Whatever. He has plenty.

He stands, groaning a bit. There's his bike, which he would absolutely get on if he could. If he knew he wouldn't, like, die trying.

So he picks it up instead and starts to walk it, very slowly, down the road. He's not far from home; Mirkwood is maybe seven minutes away at his pace.

He doesn't end up hobbling home, though.

His mom's car—the station wagon, all glistening from Monday's wash—nearly passes him by. Mike almost ducks into the trees, sure he's toast. It comes to a screeching halt across the way. He waits, because if he's already been seen like this he might as well.

*Whatever. What the fuck is the point anymore, anyway?*

He shakes the thought away as the car door opens. It's not his mother who steps out though; it's Nancy.

He hasn't seen her in two days. She'd said she was at some sleepover, but he knows it was just some bullshit lie to go hang with Steve or something. Not that she would tell him. She never tells him anything.

(not like they almost died together or anything. that wasn't a bonding experience at *all*.)

She comes rushing over, not even bothering to look. She doesn't have to, though; it's one in the afternoon in the middle of June. Everyone will be at the pool or at the park.

"Mike?! What the hell happened? Are you okay?"

"Do I *look* okay?"

Nancy withers a little at his sharp tone. He almost feels bad, but really. *Fuck no, Nancy. I'm not okay.*

"Okay, well, let's get you home—"

"Who's there?"

"No one," she grabs his bike, looking a little unsure. "Mom took Holly to the pool."

*Knew it.* "We can stick it on top," he says, indicating to the bike. "It's like three minutes on a flat road. No biggie."

"There's a slope," she argues.

"Then we'll use the fucking cords," he's already marching across the road, but it takes most of his energy to be angry and move at the same time. Black spots dance before his eyes. He leans against the car, closing them tight and putting an arm over his face.

Her hand is on his back. "Mike?"

"It's fine," he breaths. It really isn't. There are so many things that are *not* fine right now. "Just help me, please?"

Nancy nods. "Yeah, of course."

She says it like she's not always gone. Like they're perfect siblings, who always talk and always listen. It's all bullshit. They don't communicate and this isn't the fucking *Brady Bunch*.

He grabs the bike with her and they haul it on top, tying it down with the cords their dad put on for that one trip to Vermont. It's not perfect, but it'll hold.

The drive home is mostly silent. Mike rubs the sore spot on his arm. They pull into the bend. Nancy parks, slips out, and unties his bike all while he undoes his seatbelt.

She puts the bike in front of the garage door and then helps him up to the front. She keeps helping him, not saying a word until they reach their shared bathroom.

Mike sits down on the toilet. Nancy looks through the medicine cabinet for alcohol. It's all very foreign.

"Are you gonna tell me what happened?"

"Do you actually give a fuck?"

Nancy slams the bottle down on the counter and gives him that Wheeler matriarch *are-you-fucking-serious* look. "Are you fucking serious?"

Mike actually grins, which only confuses her. It doesn't last long, because moving his face really hurts.

She comes over with a few sopping cotton balls and a scowl. She presses them to his face, and he actually growls in pain. His fingers curl up.

Her expression fades into sympathy. "I'm sorry," she whispers, dabbing some more. "I know, I'm sorry."

Then it's over. She starts wiping the excess blood off.

"Troy," he starts.

Her brows furrow. "Him? I thought he was done with you guys."

He didn't know she'd actually paid attention to his school tormentors. "Nope," he says. "Well, he was for a while. Today... that was the first time for months. I was dropping Will off, and he jumped me. Waited until I was alone. Egged me on, called Will... *y'know*... and I just... I snapped. I got like one hit in before he pushed me down."

He feels pathetic. God, he can't do anything. He can't protect anyone. He really is useless.

Nancy is silent for a moment. She purses her lips, bundling up the pink and red wash cloth. "Is Will... Is he...?"

"Gay?"

She goes a little stony. "Yeah. Is he?"

Mike shrugs. "I don't know. It doesn't really matter, though."

She hums. "I guess not," she says. "I just always wondered. I think dad would probably—"

"I don't give a *fuck* about what dad says when it comes to my friends," he snaps. "Or anything, really."

Nancy huffs. "Mike—"

"He doesn't care about us, Nancy," Mike says. He's being too forceful. This topic is one they've only discussed briefly, in darkened bedrooms while their parents fight. "He's just... here."

"Yeah," Nancy sticks a bandaid on his cheekbone. "I get that. But he's still our dad. He's not a very good one, but he's not the worst."

Mike gives her that *are-you-fucking-serious* look, and this time, she laughs.

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On day 315, Mike does something awful.

Really, he knows it's awful. He knows it while he balls his fists up and glares at Kowalski in complete and utter rage. He knows it while his jaw locks and he leans forward, cheeks flushing with heat.

He knows it as he says it, “*Why don’t you just go fuck yourself,*” and the whole class gasps and leans back to just *watch*.

Kowalski blinks. The colour change in his face would be amusing if it were anyone else he’s looking at; white to red to purple in an instant. “*Excuse me?!*”

“You heard me,” he says. It’s really not helping. He should have just kept his mouth shut, but the bastard wouldn’t stop giving Dustin that pitying look and explaining things to him like he’s two.

Dustin only tugs Mike’s sleeve. “*Don’t.*”

*Do!* Screams the little voice in the back of Mike’s mind that’s mostly been calling the shots lately.

“Mr. Wheeler,” Kowalski looms over him. “Front office. *Now.*”

“No.”

There’s another gasp. A few hushed whispers. Mike leans back in his chair and inclines his chin in a challenging manner. He folds his arms over his chest.

“This behaviour will not be tolerated in my classroom—”

“*Your* classroom? Where are your credentials? When did you get them, 1922? What do you even *know* about geography? You just sit here while we work. Jesus Christ, I bet you think the earth is flat, don’t you? You’re *that* old.”

There’s a stunned silence. Then Kowalski grabs him by the arm and hauls him out of his chair. “I’ll have you know that I graduated from Yale university in 1965,” his teacher snaps, pulling him out of the classroom and down the hall. Mike struggles, trying to glare a hole into his teacher’s head. “I’ve never had such foul behaviour in nearly twenty years. *Twenty*. I’m incredibly disappointed, Mr. Wheeler. I really thought you had potential.”

“Yeah, too bad I was hanging out with the negro and the retard and the faggot, huh?”

Kowalski stops dead. His eyes are wider than Mike knew a person's could get.

"Yeah, that's right. I heard you talking to Mr. Reese in the cafeteria last week. I have to say, Mr. Kowalski, I'm incredibly disappointed."

They're standing in the middle of the hallway, both burning with anger. Mike breathes. He really breathes. This is alive.

"Now, Wheeler—"

"For your information, Dustin isn't retarded. He has cleidocranial dysplasia, which isn't even *related* to being mentally challenged—but I wouldn't expect an asshole like you to know the difference. And every one of my friends is smarter than you. They're better than you. You just *suck*, Kowalski. You just... *suck*."

"Mr. Wheeler!"

It's not Kowalski calling his name, though. Of course not. Of course it has to be the fucking *principal*.

---

"You did *what*?!"

Nancy's bookbag actually drops to the floor. She's slack-jawed.

"He cussed out a teacher," their mother repeats. "In the middle of class!"

"He was making fun of Dustin!"

"So you told him to go... do *that* to himself?! Where did you even learn that word?!"

Mike rolls his eyes. "I'm thirteen, Mom, not three."

His father puts down the orange he's peeling. Eating in the middle of a lecture, that's new. "If you think you're getting away with this, son, you're dead wrong."



“Never would have guessed,” Mike mumbles.

“What?”

“I said you have some peel on your chest.”

“*Michael!*”

His attention snaps back to his mother. She’s fuming. Her hands are on her hips, which translates to: *I mean business and you’re gonna get it.*

“Yes, Mom?”

*Oh god.*

Silence. His sister frantically makes cutting motions across her neck. Both of his parents lean forward like they’re inspecting a never-before-seen bug. “What on *earth* are you thinking?”

*I’m hungry. I didn’t eat breakfast. Lucas and Dustin are definitely pissed at me, which is a problem. Oh, and there’s this girl who’s possibly dead. Or worse. I liked her a lot but technically she never even existed anyway. “I don’t know.”*

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I don’t know.”

His parents exchange glances. Mike looks to Nancy. She shakes her head quickly. He rolls his eyes.

*Whatever.*

All of the sudden, everything shifts. His mom leans down a little, and he sees an echo of the mother she used to be. Her brow is furrowed with concern. She pushes his hair away from his eyes. It feels nice, and he almost leans into it (*does* lean into it).

“You have a fever,” she says abruptly.

*What?*

“Come upstairs with me,” she grabs his arm. He’s hauled from the interrogation chair—kitchen chair—up the stairs, and into his bedroom.

“I don’t have a fever,” Mike argues.

His mom locks the door. “I know,” she says. “Just sit down, okay?”

He sits, positive he’s never been more confused in his life. His mom hesitates by the the door for another minute before sitting down beside him. She takes his hands in her own. “I’m worried about you.”

Mike looks away; he just can’t face her. He’s suddenly so angry at himself that it hurts. What is he thinking? What is he doing?

He knows why it’s happening. He knows it’s not just hormones, which is what she’s been writing it off as for the past few months. He knows it’s because every time he sleeps he dreams about her—either all of the good moments or nightmares of the bad. He knows it’s because every time he breathes he wonders if she’s breathing too, and because he feels guilty that he can’t find her yet. No matter how hard he tries he can’t fucking *find* her, and what if she’s scared, what if she’s alone, what if she’s dead—

All of that. And Mr. Kowalski really *is* an asshole.

“Mike,” she grabs his chin and makes him meet her eyes. “Mike, sweetie, please. Talk to me.”

He can’t. He can’t. He’s not allowed to.

So instead he starts to cry. It’s so much, and it comes pouring out of him all at once. She pulls him toward her, running one hand up and down his back, muttering nonsensical promises of good in his ear. He wraps his arms around her waist and lets maybe half of the shit he’s been carrying around pour out of him. It’s like blood seeping from a gaping wound.

“Baby, hey,” she puts one cold hand on the nape of his neck, pulling back a little to look at him. She wipes his tears away, just like she used to when he was small. He feels so small still. “It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.”

“No,” he manages to choke. Just that. Then he goes back to crying, hiccuping and curling into himself.

“Michael...”

She looks hopeless. He feels sorry all of the sudden. Sorry for crying and for being such a moody fuck up.

He gasps, drawing as far away as possible. It takes so much effort to stop.

But he does. Finally. It's like breathing again. Like there was a weight on one of his lungs and is been removed (and though another remains, though it's all still cloudy and fucked up, it's a little better).

“Mike?”

He meets his mom's eyes. “I'm sorry,” he says, standing. She reaches for his hand but he jerks away. He can't do this. He doesn't deserve this. “I'm sorry. I've... I'm sorry.”

She's looking at him like he's crazy. “Mike, honey, just—”

“I can't,” he's grasping the knob and shaking it but it just won't open. “Why won't it open? *Why won't it open?!*”

He kicks it just as his mother stands. He doesn't even know what's happening, he just knows she's hugging him again, but this time, he's not crying—he's just breathing so fast.

“Calm down, okay? You're not in trouble. Hey, it's—”

“I don't care about that,” he says. His voice is strangled and rough as he pulls away. “You can ground me until I'm eighty, I don't care. I just...”

*I just want her to come home.*

-

They don't ground him until he's eighty. They don't really ground him at all, but they take away his allowance for the rest of the year

and a few of his favourite video games, too.

Mike doesn't mind.

He stays in bed for the rest of the night, staring at his ceiling and thinking of her—really thinking of her—for what feels like the first time in ages.

He barely knew her. It had been a week. But even with the messed up shit and nearly dying, and missing his friend, it was still everything to him. He holds onto the moments, knowing that one day they'll fade.

Mike has almost learned to accept the fact that she's not coming back. He's almost learned to live with the idea of never seeing her again, of just replaying that week and those moments over and over in his mind until he's dead, too. He's almost learned to forgive himself for letting her go, and for giving up when he shouldn't have.

*Almost.*

### **Author's Note:**

Thank you for reading! I'm not entirely satisfied with the ending, but that's mostly because this whole thing is pretty much angst through-and-through.

I do have some fluffy mileven ideas in mind, though...